

All the King's Men Summary and Analysis of Chapter Three – Teacher Background Notes

The events of Chapter Three take place sometime in 1933, while Jack is working for Governor Stark.

Jack visits the home of his mother and her husband Theodore Murrell, the "Young Executive," in Burden's Landing. This passage is laced with criticism of his mother's materialism, willingness to replace family heirlooms, and past remarriages to the Tycoon, the Count, and the Young Executive after the departure of his father. He takes a walk in the drizzle to a cove, where he reminisces about a picnic with Adam and [Anne Stanton](#) from his childhood, and about arguing with his mother over which college he should attend.

In the present, Jack and his mother attend a dinner party at the house of Judge Irwin. Jack considers Judge Irwin's status as a war hero, his study of Roman history and ancient warfare, and his hobby of making war figurines. At the party, the conservative dinner guests spar with Jack over Willie's socialist reforms. Jack is also cold to an aristocratic girl named Miss Dumonde, who attempts to talk to him. Later, his mother offers to get him a "decent job," and Jack is hostile towards her affection, willingness to provide him with money, and attempts to fix him up with a girl.

On the ride back, Jack thinks about how his presumed father, [Ellis Burden](#), met his mother when she was the daughter of a clerk in a logging town in Arkansas and he was a visiting attorney back in 1896.

At the hotel where Willie and his junket are staying, Jack kisses [Sadie Burke](#) on the forehead "just because [her] name is not Dumonde" (181). In Willie's suite, Jack walks in on the Boss fiercely upbraiding [Byram B. White](#), State Auditor, who had been engaged in a corrupt moneymaking scheme discovered by Willie's opposition in the state legislature loyal to former governor [Sam MacMurfee](#). Willie, going after Byram like a schoolchild, forces him to sign an undated letter of resignation for Willie to keep in exchange for his protection against impeachment proceedings taking place against him.

[Hugh Miller](#), Willie's intensely ethical Attorney General, enters after Byram to disagree with Willie's protection. The Boss, still fuming from the argument, complains that his actions, while at times unethical and vaguely unconstitutional, were for the greater good. Miller, in agreement about Willie's goals, nevertheless resigns.

Jack ruminates on Willie's adultery. Not only does Willie keep Sadie Burke as his mistress, but he also sleeps around with other women. Despite not being Willie's wife, Sadie is constantly enraged by Willie's promiscuity, and she considers it a personal affront.

As Jack digs up dirt on MacMurfee legislators, Willie begins delivering lively, fiery speeches throughout the state. Willie intimidates individual legislators using the information. The opposition decides to use Willie's own coercion and corruption against him by initiating impeachment proceedings against him.

On April 4, 1933, Jack visits Mr. Lowdan, leader of the opposition, to coldly inform him that enough legislators have been bribed or bullied into rejecting impeachment. The next day, the impeachment bill is killed. That evening, a massive crowd of rural supporters of Willie descend upon the Capitol lawn, and Governor Stark addresses them victoriously.

After the speech, Willie returns to the mansion to find that his wife has gone to bed. She is angry that Willie has refused to "throw Byram to the wolves" yet is unwilling to leave him, largely for the sake of their son (212). It is revealed that in the following years, after Willie's reelection in 1934, she and the governor become privately separated. Nevertheless, the two appear in public for photos at times, largely because Lucy thinks she still has an opportunity to mould her son, whose direction has become increasingly dominated by Willie's wishes. Despite Lucy's wishes, their son [Tom Stark](#) becomes a sexually active football quarterback.

Analysis

Chapter Three first delves into the life and backstory of [Jack Burden](#), then provides a clear view of the actions and attitudes of [Willie Stark](#) as governor as he deals with a serious threat to his administration.

Jack has a particular relationship with his mother, who is never once named in the book. He describes his affection for her in cold and mechanical terms in the very first paragraph of the chapter: "The eye, very slightly protruding, would be fixed glitteringly on some point beyond me" (153). Jack also criticizes his mother's profligacy and willingness to replace family heirlooms in favor of new furniture. He also looks down on his mother's frequent remarrying, tying that tendency to her symbolic remodeling: "I sat and looked at Theodore and at the new Sheraton break-front desk, and wondered how permanent they were" (160).

Jack ignored his mother's advice when she had recommended he go to Harvard and not the State University, and he angrily spurns her for meddling in his life after she tries to fix him up with a girl or uses her connections to procure a job for him. He strives to prove his independence, yet he is still financially dependent on his mother, a fact he does not admit.

Jack has abandoned his past at Burden's Landing, yet he returns to visit his mother and the Judge. Although he looks down on the conservative aristocrats who disagree with Willie's abuse of power, he desires to be respected by them (and by his mother, especially) for his connection to the new administration. Although he does not care about Willie's abuse of power or his reforms, he argues in favor of his boss, almost only because the dinner guests argue against the governor. Finally, Jack desires the approval of his mother though he is dismissive of both her opinions and the entire idea of familial love. In short, to all these people, Jack is stubborn, yet he has no particularly heartfelt opinions. He is simply

antagonistic, and ultimately, this dichotomous tension between wanting their adoration and disliking their opinions leaves him empty inside.

Jack's dismissiveness of others is shadowed by his internal feeling that he is defined through those around him. As a person, Jack has no strong measure of himself, so he considers the eyes of his mother and her friends as one metric. This particular thought comes through in the narration:

They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in the car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. It is a vacation from being you. (178)

When Jack returns to the capital, he is thrust into a frantic situation, much in opposition to the calm dinner scene at Burden's Landing. While Jack seems at ease and equally passive in both atmospheres, he kisses Sadie on the forehead and comments that her "name is not Dumonde" (181). Jack feels happier at work, because his work gives him purpose. Additionally, he respects Sadie as a savvy, action-oriented, real woman, as opposed to the vacuous, genteel Dumonde girl who put on an empty facade in Burden's Landing.

In the second part of the chapter, the narrative focus turns to Willie. Willie's forceful fight to stave off impeachment illustrates the sort of politician he has become. Willie's handling of the Byram B. White scandal shows the extent of his newfound domineering attitude. In the last chapter, it was subtly indicated that County Treasurer Willie's disapproval of the corrupt bargain in Mason County stemmed in part from his exclusion from the deal itself. As governor, Willie has become the ringmaster of state government, and he takes pleasure from being in full control over all the deals that transpire in the capital. While agreeing to protect White, Willie treats him like a pet. He forces White to sign an undated letter of resignation; Willie, acting like a feudal lord demanding fealty from a subordinate, now holds White in bondage.

The following scene provides a contrast between Willie and his attorney general, Hugh Miller. Willie Stark is a young, inexperienced politician who tolerates corruption in order to make government run smoothly and meet his noble aims. Willie feels that human beings are inherently corrupt and easily manipulated; he feels that therefore is righteous in playing off these qualities in order to provide for the poor. Hugh Miller is an older, highly distinguished person who is similarly new to politics. Miller shares Willie's desire to help the poor, but unlike Willie, he is completely intolerant of graft. Miller is a moral absolutist, essentially believing that right is right and that one's hands should be completely clean of distinctly illegal activities. But Willie is more of a moral relativist, taking rightness as subjective and perhaps culturally bound, considering that if by tolerating petty corruption he can do better as governor, then it is necessary to do so. He is thus willing to protect individuals like White. Jack also takes this more practical morality to heart:

"*Ought* is a funny word," I said. "If you mean, to win, then time will tell. If you mean, to do right, then nobody will ever be able to tell you."

The manner in which Willie successfully staves off impeachment--digging up dirt on rivals, bringing fiery speeches to crowds of poor citizens, and abusing his subordinates while shielding corruption--indicates the success of his underhanded manipulation of the state's political system. By the end of the chapter, Willie is essentially in control of the state. Yet, Willie's moral compass seems irrevocably changed by these events. Hugh Miller, the only truly ethical person in his cabinet, has left him, and his wife has been marginalized as well.